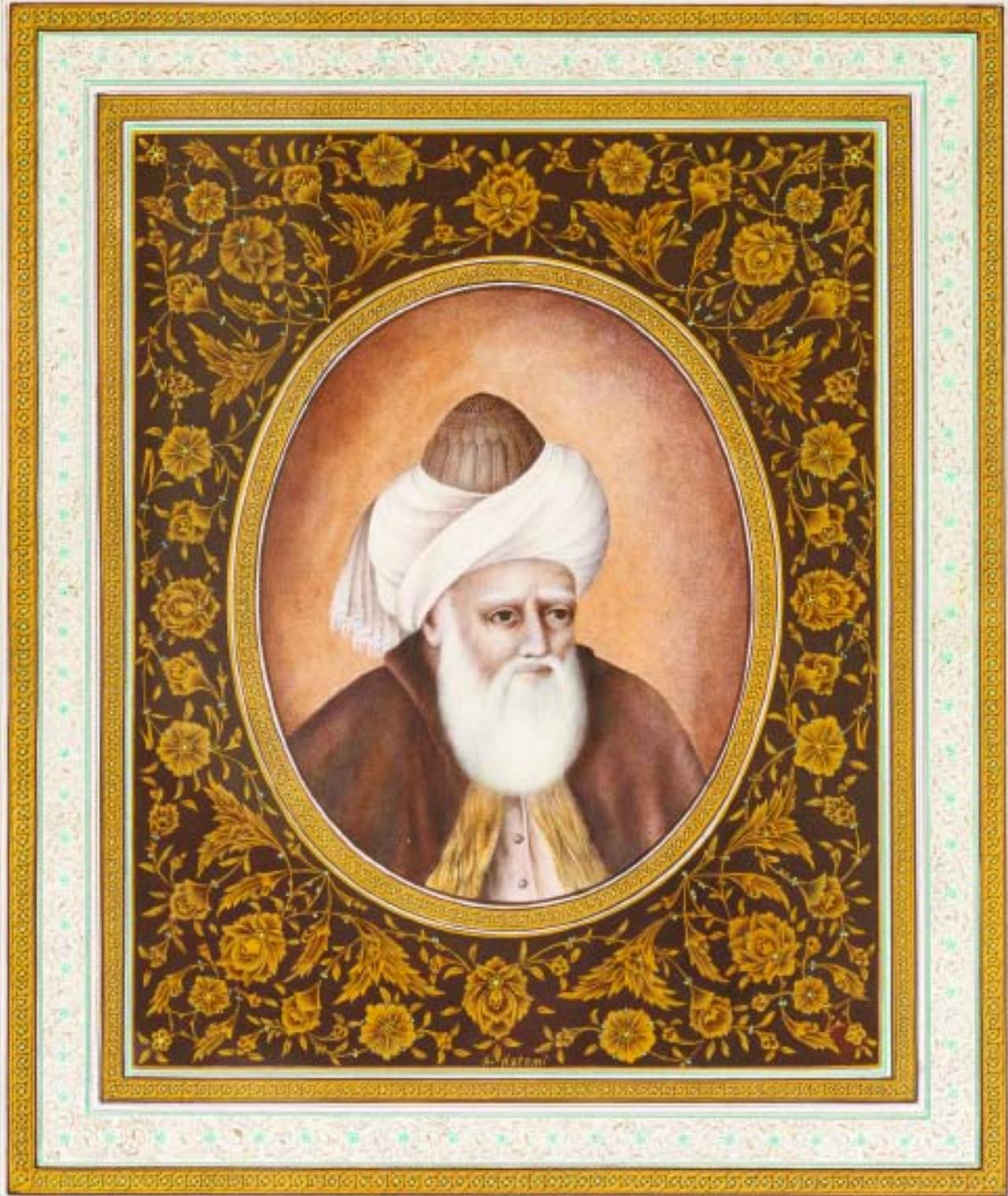


Haydar Hatemi: The Istanbul Painter



CASTELLANI
ART MUSEUM
OF NIAGARA UNIVERSITY

Haydar Hatemi: The Istanbul Painter

January 8 - May 27, 2012

Some Hindus have an elephant to show.
No one here has ever seen an elephant.
They bring it at night to a dark room.

One by one, we go in the dark and come out
saying how we experience the animal.
One of us happens to touch the trunk.
A water-pipe kind of creature.

Another, the ear. A very strong, always moving
back and forth, fan-animal. Another, the leg.
I find it still, like a column on a temple.

Another touches the curved back.
A leathery throne. Another, the cleverest,
feels the tusk. A rounded sword made of porcelain.
He is proud of his description.

Each of us touches one place
and understands the whole in that way.
The palm and the fingers feeling in the dark
are how the senses explore the reality
of the elephant.

If each of us held a candle there,
and if we went in together, we could see it.

- Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks

In this ancient, oft-repeated parable, the 13th-century Sufi saint and Persian poet Rumi explains the illusiveness of truth and the source of human conflict. Just as men struggling for answers in the dark, our limits of perception deny us certainty. Yet according to Rumi, even the most sacred truths have multiple perspectives; we simply cannot see how all those perspectives are connected by one reality.

In our current historical moment, when some claim that the Muslim religion is by definition extremist, remembering the spiritual teachings of Rumi articulates for us a philosophy of tolerance within Islam. Rumi argued vigorously for tolerance, believing that all religious experience derived from the same universal source. He reasoned that our disagreements should not prevent us from living in harmony. If only we could learn to lift up our candles together, we would see that our differences are mere illusions, a symptom of the darkness in which we live.

To understand Haydar Hatemi as an artist, you must first contemplate the cultural backgrounds that inform his perspectives. Having left his native Iran, a country deeply polarized by religious conflicts, Hatemi immigrated to Turkey where the principle of “peaceful coexistence” continues to be highly prized. Rumi’s writings encapsulate this philosophy of life for many modern Turks, as they do for Hatemi who cites the Sufi mystic as a continual source of inspiration. “Today, people need peace as much as they need food and water,” he says. “I hope my art can be the common medium where people of all faiths can realize that they have more similarities than they have differences.”

By turning to an idealized time and place of prolonged stability and harmony—Istanbul during the Ottoman Empire—Hatemi explores themes of peace and prosperity. With an eye for opulent details, he uses his training as a miniature painter in the Persian tradition to imagine Ottoman life and landscapes. From large scale paintings on canvas, to gilded tables, to meticulously painted ostrich eggs, Hatemi fuses Middle Eastern, Western, and Islamic artistic traditions. Like the city that plays his muse, Hatemi embraces many perspectives.

Carrie Hertz
Curator of Folk Arts

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Barks, Coleman. 2006. *A Year with Rumi: Daily Readings*. New York: HarperCollins.

Masroori, Cyrus. 2010. “An Islamic Language of Toleration: Rumi’s Criticism of Religious Persecution,” *Political Research Quarterly* 63:2.

About the Artist

At the age of 15, Haydar Hatemi (b. 1945) left his home, a village in Azerbaijani Iran, to attend the Tabriz School of Art where he studied sculpture and a traditional style of gilded illumination known as *tazhib* (Arabic; *tezhip*: Turkish). Later at the Fine Arts Academy of Tehran University, Hatemi trained with renowned masters of classical Persian miniature painting Hussian Behzad and Abu Talib Mugimi. Throughout the 1970s in Iran, Hatemi won a number of awards and important commissions for his artwork including two public statues, one of Shah Abbas on horseback displayed at Isfahan's Square, and another titled *Birds and the Rock* located in Argentina Square in Tehran.

After the Iranian Revolution, Hatemi immigrated with his family to Turkey where he became known within the art community as the "Istanbul Painter." Influenced by Ottoman miniaturists and Orientalist painters—especially nineteenth century Western artists who traveled to Old Istanbul, Hatemi experimented with ways to combine Eastern and Western forms of art. His work caught the eye of the Qatari Sheikh who began commissioning large scale works from him depicting the grandeur of the Ottoman Empire.

Qatar, a country once part of the Ottoman Empire and still under the rule of a monarchy, has become Hatemi's greatest benefactor. In 2011, Sheikh Hamad Al-Thani announced that upon his death he would convert his palace into a museum, featuring Hatemi's collected paintings as its centerpiece.

In 1997, Hatemi and his wife followed their children to the United States where they were enrolled at the University of Kentucky. Now settled in Lexington, Hatemi paints from his basement, making regular trips to Turkey and Qatar. Blending his many influences—Persian and Ottoman; Eastern and Western; Iranian, Turkish, and American, Hatemi wishes to encourage mutual understanding between diverse groups of people. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, he created a series of miniature paintings he named *Stories of the Messengers* that illustrated common teachings found in four sacred texts—the Torah (Judaism), the Qur'an (Islam), the Bible (Christianity), and the Avesta (Zoroastrianism). Consistent throughout his work, Hatemi explores themes of tolerance and cultural coexistence.

Hatemi's son, Lachin, currently lives in Buffalo, New York.





View of the Black Sea, oil and gold leaf on board, Haydar Hatemi, 2011.

The Ottomans and Istanbul

As the longest lasting dynasty in world history, the Ottomans ruled over a territory that included the Balkans, Middle East, and North Africa. At the crossroads of three continents, the Ottoman Empire provided a supportive environment for multi-cultural and multi-religious experience. This enriching experience nurtured dialogue between civilizations in the East and the West. Deeply rooted in Turkish and Islamic traditions, this dialogue was institutionalized in the form of a *millet* system, in which Muslims, Jews, and various Christian denominations enjoyed the freedom to govern their own religious, social, educational, financial, and legal matters. Orthodox Christians and Jews especially, who fled persecution from the Spanish Inquisition, found a safe haven in the Ottoman lands. Ottoman multiculturalism has been increasingly remembered during the destructive divisions and violence of the last century in the Balkans and the Middle East. Many still refer to “Pax Ottomana” (the stable years of Ottoman rule) as a time of peace and prosperity for people of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds that lasted for centuries.

Social and religious life among the Ottoman Muslims was greatly influenced by Sufism. This mystical aspect of Islam emphasized tolerance and openness to people of all religious backgrounds. In Sufism, love is at the heart of all creation. All creation is to be loved, due to the love of God. Sufism, as exemplified in the teachings of Rumi, the 13th-century poet and theologian, inspired the social life of Ottoman Istanbul, one that displayed tolerance and love within an exceptionally diverse context.

Istanbul was the microcosm of Ottoman multiculturalism. The art of living together was epitomized in Istanbul. Before the Ottomans made it the jewel of their throne, Istanbul was the capital of the Roman and later the Byzantine Empires for more than a thousand years.

At the crossroads of Asia and Europe, connecting trade routes between North and South, Istanbul served as a hub for commercial, as well as cultural, intellectual, and social interactions affecting a vast geography.

Istanbul was referred to simply as “The City” in many languages. The word “Istanbul” is said to be derived from the Greek phrase *eis tēn Polin* (εἰς τὴν Πόλιν) meaning “to the city.” The city was called more than twenty different names, including *New Rome*, *Dersaadet* (Land of Felicity), *Bab-i Ali* (The Sublime Porte), and *Asitane* (The Center or the Doorstep), though Byzantium, Constantinople, and Istanbul have been its official names throughout its history. Many nations attempted to take Constantinople from the Romans, including the Huns, Vikings, and Arabs, but they failed to break through the three layers of thick city walls surrounded by sea. The beauty of the city did not just attract armies, but also thinkers, architects, artists, and poets. Ancient churches, mosques, palaces, castles, and mansions illuminate the city’s landscape to this day. Due to this rich cultural heritage, Istanbul was chosen by the European Union to be the European Capital of Culture for 2010.



Landscape of Old Istanbul, oil on ostrich egg, Haydar Hatemi, 2008.

The many marvelous views of the Bosphorus, the strait that connects the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara, have always enchanted poets and painters, both Ottoman and Western. There are hundreds of songs and poems that praise Istanbul—its neighborhoods, districts, streets, and people. A hill by the Golden Horn, an inlet harbor of the Bosphorus, is named after a nineteenth-century French poet Pierre Loti, whose poems were inspired by the splendid views of Istanbul. One of the most famous poems about Istanbul, written by Yahya Kemal Beyatli (1884-1958), expresses its awe-inspiring elegance in these beautiful words.

Bir Başka Tepeden

Sana dün bir tepeden baktım aziz İstanbul!
Görmedim gezmediğim, sevmediğim hiçbir yer.
Ömrüm oldukça, gönül tahtıma keyfince kurul!
Sade bir semtini sevmek bile bir ömre değer.

Nice revnaklı şehirler görülür dünyada,
Lakin efsunlu güzellikleri sensin yaratan.
Yaşamıştır derim, en hoş ve uzun rüyada
Sende çok yıl yaşayan, sende ölen, sende yatan.

From Another Hill

Yesterday I looked at you from a hill, O glorious Istanbul!
I did not see a single spot that I didn't visit and didn't love.
Come, come and sit on my heart's throne as long as I live
Just to love a district of yours is worth a whole life.

In the world there are many shining cities
But only you create enchanting beauties.
Those truly lived, I say, the nicest and longest dream,
Ones who lived many years, passed away, and rest in you.

The Ottoman lands and Istanbul enchanted many painters as well, including Bellini, Zorano, Konstantin Kapidagli, and Aivazovsy. The palace, especially its exquisite and mysterious harem, social life in the streets of Istanbul, and the Bosphorus where green foliage, blue sky, and turquoise waters meet, inspired these and many other painters. Haydar Hatemi belongs to this line of Istanbul painters, whose art finds expression in the beauties of this city.

Dr. Mustafa Gökçek, Assistant Professor of History
Coordinator of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies Program. Niagara University

*Translation by the author, inspired by Mevlut Ceylan. See: Ceylan, Mevlut, ed. 1996. *Istanbul Poems*. Istanbul: Metropolitan Municipality of Istanbul.



Sultans of the Ottoman
Empire, oil on ostrich eggs,
Haydar Hatemi, 2008.



View of Galata Tower, oil and gold leaf on board, Haydar Hatemi, 2011.



The Sufi Order of Whirling Dervishes, oil on ostrich egg, Haydar Hatemi, 2008.

Acknowledgements

Curator of Folk Arts Carrie Hertz

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